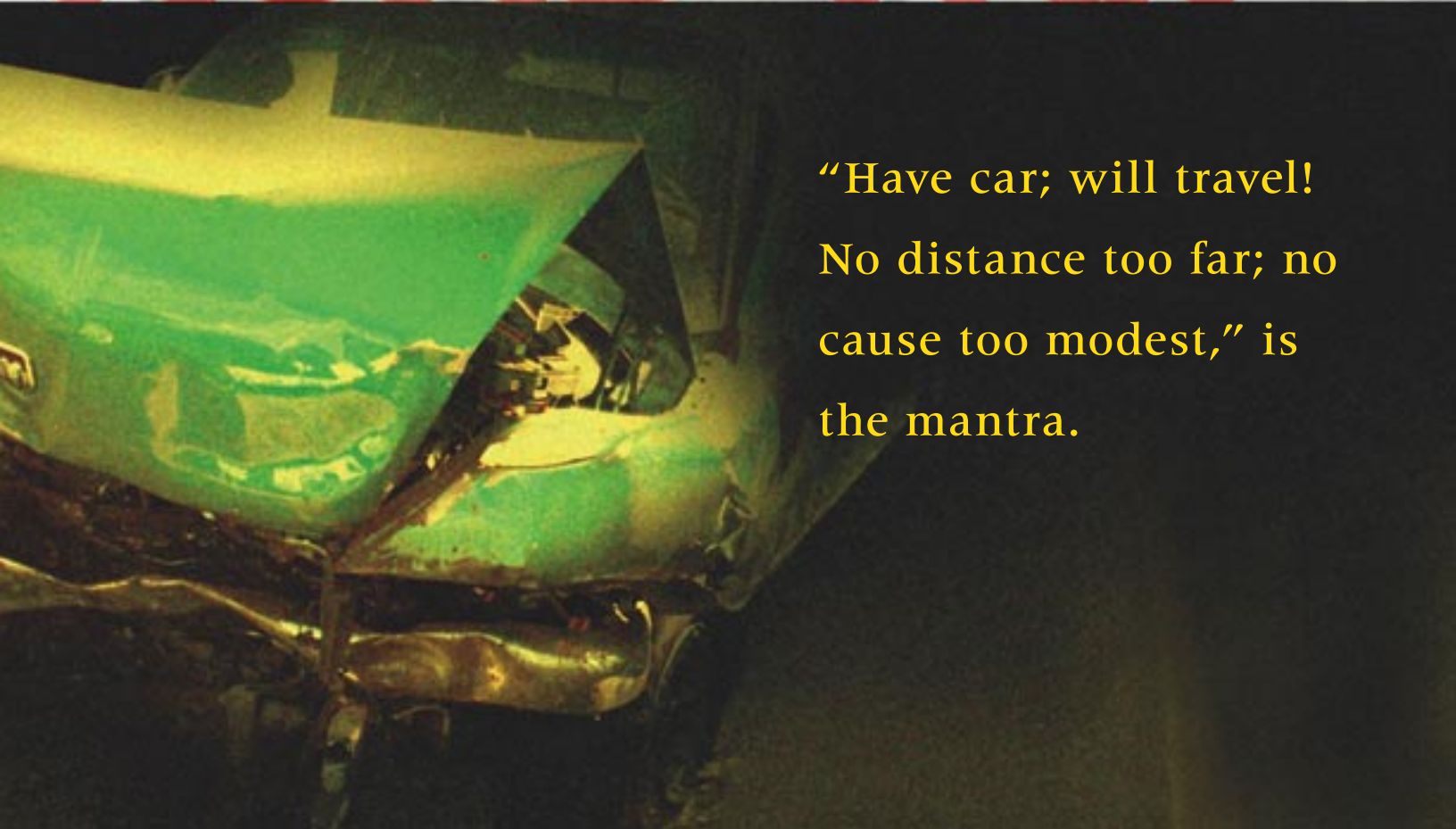


# ROAD TRIP



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By LCdr. Donald E. Kennedy

Ask any teenager or young adult, and they’ll tell you a road trip is synonymous with fun and adventure. “Have car; will travel! No distance too far; no cause too modest,” is the mantra. The road trip, a perceived right of adult passage, has been the glorified subject of several recent movies oriented toward young adults.

My misadventure fits the Safety Center profile to a “T.” My road trip was a “simple”

midnight run home. And, yes, I applied about as much forethought and common sense to my travel as Jake and Elwood did in their famous drive to Chicago in *The Blues Brothers*. Fortunately, my story has a happy ending. For many young Sailors and Marines, however, statistics prove otherwise.

When I was a midshipman at the Naval Academy, I participated in airborne training at Fort Benning, Ga. My father had served in

the 101st Airborne, so attending jump school seemed like the perfect opportunity to march a few miles in my father's footsteps. And, Fort Benning was only a six-to-seven-hour drive from my home in Clinton, Miss. By taking a POV, I had transportation for weekend excursions and the opportunity to drive home for the upcoming 4th of July weekend. I didn't know the drive home would prove to be far more dangerous than jumping out an airplane at 1,200 feet.

My three weeks at Fort Benning were memorable and action-packed. The opportunity to jump out a perfectly good airplane seemed exciting, invigorating and dangerous. As the 4th of July weekend approached, however, I anxiously looked forward to "fleeing the coop" and spending some time with my family and current girlfriend, whom I had seen little of since leaving for Annapolis more than a year before.

Because we lost a training day to the long holiday weekend, we were required to complete Monday's training on Friday. We started our daily grind an hour earlier at 0400; reveille was at 0330. We ran, marched and jumped until 2000 that evening. Before dismissing the troops for the weekend, however, the airborne training cadre assembled and subjected us to the mandatory, preholiday safety brief.

After a tortuous ordeal that seemed to last an eternity, liberty call finally was announced. I hustled to the barracks, impatiently waited in line to shower, quickly changed, and packed my bag for the weekend. As I slid behind the wheel of my father's SUV about 2230 that evening, the seat felt relaxing to my tired and aching body. I was energized by the prospect of going home, and I never thought twice about my 19-hour day (so far) or the message my body was telling me.

I stopped at a local convenience store for gas and grabbed a 20-ounce Mountain Dew and a pack of sunflower seeds. Suitably equipped and alert, I was ready for the midnight run.

The first few hours of my trip were uneventful. Once I hit Highway 80, it was a straight shot to Interstate 20 and home. With little nighttime traffic, I set the cruise control at 10 mph over the speed limit, cranked up my

favorite tunes, and started counting down the miles to the state line.

Over time, my eyes grew heavy, and I struggled to keep them open. Remember, this road trip was a long time before I had heard of the operational-risk-management concept, but, even at 19 years old, I was smart enough to implement my own "risk controls." So, what did this wise, young teenager do? I rolled down the windows, threw in my favorite road-trip cassette, and began to howl at the moon with my not-so-impressive renditions of 80's rock classics.

I was good for 20 more songs until the sound of my tires on the gravel shoulder brought me out of my trance. I quickly swerved back onto the road just before I almost hit a bridge. OK, I realized now I was spending less time on driving and more time trying to stay awake. I took the next exit, found a truck stop, and went inside.

I wish my story ended here, but it didn't. The simple concept of getting a hotel room for the night was foreign to a teenager who saw 50 bucks as half a month's spending money. Furthermore, I pleasantly was surprised to discover I was only 100 miles from home. Although I couldn't remember driving through half the state of Alabama, my destination was within reach. I just needed a little break—I convinced myself. I went inside the truck stop's 24-hour restaurant, sat down, and ordered breakfast with a pot of coffee. A half-hour later, I declared myself rejuvenated and hit the road.

About sunrise, I crossed the state line—almost 28 hours after my day had begun. The familiar road and countryside was a welcome sight. Feeling well-caffeinated, fresh, and ready for the backstretch, I no longer needed my rudimentary but resourceful "risk controls." I rolled up my windows, turned off the air conditioning, and turned down the radio. It now was all downhill—well, almost.

The next thing I remember was feeling the impact of a front-end collision. When I awoke, my vehicle still was moving, but I had no forward visibility because of the mangled hood directly in front of the windshield. I finally realized I could see through a gap below the hood,

and I used my limited visibility to pull over to the side of the road. I climbed out unharmed but saw my vehicle likely was totaled. A few hundred yards up the road, an 18-wheeler also had pulled over to the shoulder. I then realized what had happened: I had fallen asleep and rear-ended the tractor-trailer. Ironically, the only damage to the truck was a bent “Drive Safely” sign suspended from its bumper.

My road trip had ended less than 60 miles from my home. The good news was that I walked away with only minor cuts and a few bruises to my ego. In another half-mile, the road took a sharp bend. If not for the tractor-trailer, I likely would have plowed into a stand of trees at 75 to 80 mph with the cruise control engaged. I certainly wouldn’t have been here to write this story.


In retrospect, my misplaced motivation to get home and maximize time with my family drove me to make some poor decisions. First and foremost, rather than get a good night’s sleep and leave when I was rested, I tried to drive through the night while physically exhausted. I had been awake for 28 hours when my body finally cried “no mas.” Second, I selected my desired arrival time and then adjusted my speed en route to get there. My attitude was, “What’s another 10 to 15 mph above the speed limit?” Third, I ignored numerous warning signs that my body rapidly was approaching its limits. Despite the urban-teen myths, rolling down windows, listening to loud music, singing in the car, taking in lots of caffeine, and even stopping occasionally are not “risk controls,” and they will not make sure you safely reach your destination. Last, when driving by automobile, the price of a hotel room is often a wise investment that pays in spades.

From a leadership perspective, the training command made some poor risk decisions, as well. The training cadre conducted a mandatory preholiday safety brief, but it had an unintended and negative effect. By delaying leave and liberty call until late in the evening, they actually encouraged poor decision-making and increased the risk to those who were traveling over the weekend. If they had anticipated risk

and desired to encourage positive behavior, Friday’s schedule could have been pared back, allowing leave and liberty call to begin at a reasonable daytime hour. If this was not possible under the course-schedule constraints, they could have made the more difficult but prudent decision and delayed leave/liberty until the next morning.

I look back at some of my earlier decisions with absolute bewilderment: What was I thinking? When driving, I now ensure that I am well-rested, or I delay my travel. My wife and I split the driving; we take frequent breaks, and we seldom drive more than 8 to 10 hours a day. Anything more, and we stop for the night. I know that a hotel room is a cheap investment for my family’s safety.

At work, when my officers or enlisted bring me a leave chit, I ask questions about their travel plans and sign it only after writing deliberate comments like “Buckle Up” or “Don’t Drink and Drive” in the comments section. I borrowed an idea from the Safety Center Traffic toolbox ([www.safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/toolbox](http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/toolbox)), and created a “Contract to Arrive Alive” that I use for all the holidays and long leave periods. The contract re-enforces desired behavior and forces personnel to do some planning before I sign their leave chits. Do these things work? I don’t know, but, honestly, I don’t care. The important thing is taking advantage of an opportunity to put out the message and have some face time with my troops. We have to do something to educate our young Sailors and Marines, who, like me at age 19, perceive themselves to be “10 feet tall and bulletproof.”

Sailors and Marines serve in high-risk organizations and environments, and we perform our duties remarkably well. However, we need to carry the same discipline, risk management, and common sense into our off-duty activities—especially when operating private-motor vehicles. For those of us who serve on board ships, in the field, and in aviation squadrons, it’s hard to believe that the most dangerous mission may just be the drive home. 

LCdr. Kennedy flies with HSL-44.